DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 310 909 RC 017 207

AUTHOR Sallee, Alvin L.; Hoffman, Kay
TITLE A Model for Rural Social Service Outreach.
PUB DATE Jul 88
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual National Institute on Social Work and Human Services in Rural Areas (13th, Fort Collins, CO, July 24-27, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Education; Community Programs; Community Services; Delivery Systems; *Outreach Programs; *Program Development; *Program Implementation; *Rural Areas; Rural Urban Differences; *Social Services
IDENTIFIERS Extension Service

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a model for rural social service outreach programs, based upon the following: (1) an explanation of various resource systems and how they are related to outreach services; (2) current economic and social conditions of rural areas; (3) rural client systems; (4) the relationship of the agricultural extension model to rural outreach; and (5) the use of community analyses. In order to implement the model, existing services must be recognized and used. It is also important to gain visibility and acceptance, perhaps through speaking engagements before civic groups. Interested leaders should be identified and successful program achievements should be made known. Promotional ideas can also be borrowed from successful retail businesses or services. For effective rural outreach, it is important to understand the differences and similarities between rural and urban communities, especially in regard to resource systems. Other considerations to be taken into account during implementation include socioeconomic factors and technological advances. Implementation strategies should fit the particular needs and characteristics of the community. The Agricultural Extension Model is one of the most successful models of disseminating services to rural areas. (TES)

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A Model for Rural Social Service Outreach

Presented to

The 13th Annual National Institute on Social Work
and Human Services In Rural Areas

by

Alvin L. Sallee, M.S.W.
Professor
Department of Social Work
New Mexico State University
P.O. Box 30001
Las Cruces, New Mexico 88003
(505) 646-2143

Kay Hoffman, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Social Work Program
Marygrove College
8425 McNichols
Detroit, MI 48221
(313) 862-8000, Extension 363
(313) 545-3715

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A MODEL FOR RURAL SOCIAL SERVICE OUTREACH

Introduction

Outreach in rural areas in order to provide needed social services is an important aspect of social work practice. How to best develop outreach approaches and then how to implement them are related to the successful use of a conceptual framework or model. The purpose of this paper is to present a model for rural social service outreach that is based upon the following: 1) An explanation of various resource systems and, how they are related to outreach services; 2) current economic and social conditions of rural areas; 3) rural client systems; 4) the relationship of the agricultural extension model to rural outreach; and 5) the use of community analyses. Each of the above areas is discussed in this paper. Together they inform a model of rural social service outreach and an implementation plan developed by the authors' consultations in several rural communities where information and referral programs and community corrections programs were developing. Although these two services are vastly different, a common model for outreach emerged.

Resource Systems

A useful conceptual construct for understanding resource systems and their relationship to outreach services is found in Pincus and Minahan's approach to systems (Pincus and Minahan, 1972). All persons, regardless of their personal or social situations, need resources to help them deal with life tasks. Individuals and families as well as groups and communities depend upon resources outside

themselves. According to Pincus and Minahan, three resource systems are available. They are the informal, the formal and the societal.

Informal resources provide both emotional support and tangible goods to persons through an informal network of family, friends and acquaintances. In the past, rural areas had strong informal resource systems on which individuals and families relied. Simple illustrations include barn raising and mutual economic aid. Today, informal resources systems continue to be important but cannot be expected to meet needs in rural communities.

Formal resources are organizations or groups to which individuals belong and through which are provided benefits to members and their families. Examples of formal resources are labor unions, welfare rights groups, cooperatives and lodges. Important supports and significant help are found in formal resources, but like informal resources, cannot be expected to provide for persons in our complex world--rural or urban.

Societal resources provide necessary services and support that informal and formal resources do not. In fact, societal resources are the foundations for contemporary life, both in rural and urban areas. They are medical services, social services, educational resources, income assistance programs, criminal justice services and countless others which make up the fabric of our lives. Social workers are employed to assist people to attain the societal resources they need. Our model addresses the provision of societal resources while utilizing and supporting informal and formal resources.

Economic and Social Conditions

Migration patterns, the concentration of wealth among the few, technological innovations (especially in communications), consolidation of services (social and educational) and the sharing of common problems all contribute to the need for social services and how social services are provided in rural areas.

Migration patterns are marked by the rural to urban transition and, more recently, by an out-migration pattern from some cities into selected rural areas (County and City Data Book, 1983). The rural to urban pattern leaves rural communities without needed societal resources and without the means to distribute resources even if they were plentiful. Some rural areas of the country are experiencing population growth related to the failure of societal resources in urban areas, especially the northern industrial cities. Altogether, the migration patterns leave individuals and communities in distress, with no resources to actually meet the needs of people. For example, homelessness is a phenomena found not only in the large cities of America, but also in small towns and rural areas and clearly related to migration patterns.

Although the concentration of wealth has remained relatively stable over the last fifty years, there are indications that recently, wealth is more concentrated among a very few people and corporations (Bell, 1985). The number of middle class people is diminishing while those who are living in poverty are increasing. Some results of this change are increasing poverty among whole communities, rather than among individuals or even among specific ethnic groups, and a growing need for societal resources when the resources are not available. For

example, more and more women, rural and urban, black, white and Hispanic, are heads of households and are living in poverty (Wilson, 1987). Yet, resources for families, particularly for financial assistance, are pitiful. Rather than viewing increasing poverty among women as a problem brought on by changing economic and social conditions, low-income women are seen as perpetrators of their own demise and are found at fault, therefore, undeserving of assistance. Entire communities are brought down by changing oil prices on the world market or by farm policies at the Federal level. Individual people feel the results of broad changes, but societal resources are not brought to bear upon their conditions.

Rural communities participate in the innovations in the communications industry. Most homes in America, including rural homes, have television. Entertainment and news are brought from the hubs of New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. All Americans are influenced by the media, specifically by television. Research comparing ruralites and urbanites regarding marketing taste finds few differences, but lifestyles between rural and urban dwellers still show marked differences. Rural people report concern about the major problems of American life (crime, drugs, etc.) in much the same way as urban dwellers. The point is that rural persons are affected by technological changes, and these changes must be considered and can be used in the development of outreach services. For example, some universities are marketing educational programs vis-a-vis telecommunications.

The concept of state-wideness incorporated in several pieces of Federal legislation in the 1960's and 70's brought services to more

and more rural communities. Statewide plans for child welfare, and Title XX Social Services contributed to the creation of more services to outlying areas. In the 80's, rural communities have lost services and are asked to locally support them even when they are not financially capable. Yet the rural tradition of providing for family has resulted in some notable programs. It is not unusual for a Meals On Wheels program to be located and supported through rural churches (Carter, 1988). Exceptional programs cannot be used to excuse and explain away the withdrawal of services where the need continues. What is important here is the recognition that services were provided, but were not available long enough to meet the needs. We continue to have the model of a concentration of services, but the quality of services has markedly diminished.

When developing outreach services, it is important to recognize that although each community sees conditions differently, there are common problems and conditions experienced throughout the country which will effect how our outreach services will be developed and implemented. In the above descriptions, we have attempted to illustrate how migration patterns have altered and should be considered when developing outreach. The concentration of wealth among a few is affecting rural communities experiencing enormous stress, not from their own making, but from economic policies and shifts created in distant places. Communication advancements are experienced in all rural areas and can be used. Not only do we understand how and what people buy and enjoy in the forms of entertainment, but also how these advancements can be used more positively. Lastly, the withdrawal of societal resources in rural communities must be understood and taken

into consideration when outreach plans are being made. We cannot forget that although services have been withdrawn, the needs have not diminished.

Rural Client Systems

Who are rural clients and what are their needs? In 1982, twenty-six percent of the United States population was categorized as residents of rural areas (County and City Data Book, 1983). Major problems in rural settings include inadequate funding for education, the absence of appropriate transportation, great distances from health care facilities and inadequate judicial services (Austin, Mahony and Seidl, 1977).

The move toward a service economy in the United States has resulted in a shift from goods-producing occupations to service occupations. These include education, knowledge, information and other service oriented occupations. In 1920, 53 percent of the workforce was engaged in manufacturing, 28 percent in agriculture and the extractive industries and 19 percent in the service sector. By 1976, agriculture represented on 4 percent of the population while 29 percent of the population was engaged in manufacturing, 50 percent in information, and 17 percent in other services. It is predicted that by the year 2000, only 2 percent of the workforce will be engaged in agriculture with 22 percent in manufacturing. Over 66 percent of the population may be working in information dissemination and 10 percent in other services (Moliter, 1981).

The rural poor live throughout the United States with the South accounting for the largest concentration of low income people.

Approximately 20 percent of the Southern population are poor while 9 percent of those in the Northeast are poor; 10 percent of the North Central states population and 10 percent of the Western population are poor. Despite the high incidence of poverty in the rural United States, federal funds expended for income and other welfare programs in rural areas are only one-quarter the amount received by metropolitan areas (Osgood, 1977).

Some theories have stated that America has become a mass society, despite the differences between rural/urban attitudes and values (Glenn & Hill, 1977). However, rural persons do tend to be more conservative, distrustful of outsiders, work-oriented, religious and more hesitant about change than their urban counterparts. Persons living in rural areas also display more prejudice and ethnocentrism when compared with the urban population. Rural persons are often more satisfied with their communities than are urban persons with theirs (Lee & Lassey, 1980). One must be cautious not to overstate the differences between rural and urban population groups, but it is important to understand subtle differences which may impact upon the acceptance of services.

Agricultural Extension Model

One of the most successful models of disseminating services to rural areas has been the Agricultural Extension Model. It has played an important role in service provision, and social workers have learned lessons from it in the following areas: 1) Methods of working with rural communities; 2) the use of technology and skills to link community persons together to meet their own needs; 3) linkages to

universities with a land grant focus on public services; 4) seeing persons who need help as consumers (Buxton, 1976).

The major criticism of the Agricultural Extension Model is its emphasis on service to the large, wealthy farms of the United States rather than service to low income farmers. In general, the Department of Agriculture supports large scale enterprises and the market side of agriculture, thereby negating concerns regarding quality of life for the vast majority of rural people (Fink, 1986). Our model utilizes the positive components of the Agricultural Extension Model.

Community Analysis

A component of a successful model for outreach services must contain a method of community analysis. Although we have attempted to discuss broad similarities among societal needs and resources, we recognize that inherent in any model which effectively assists in the provision of services must be an understanding of separate and distinct communities. The context of where services are delivered is often neglected by the social welfare institutions and even by social workers who are implementing policies and services. Every community is different, and even communities located side by side show subtle variations. Naturally, the rural-urban differences continue to be important, largely because social services are too often provided with the urban community in mind.

A Community Life Scale originated by Denton, York and Moran (1988) is suggested as an effective tool to analyze community. Descriptive dimensions regarding community on this scale are: 1) The way in which decisions are made in the community; 2) pace of life (how

change is incorporated in community); 3) lifestyle (new or traditional values); 4) values (traditional to cosmopolitan); 5) support systems (formal to informal); 6) internal-external focus (the extent to which individuality is accepted or shunned) and 7) educational emphasis. The dimensions are compiled to form a community perception (Denton, York and Moran, 1988), a term used to determine the rurality of a given community. This is an important concept when developing outreach services.

Implementation

Delivering social services to rural communities depends upon carefully planned strategies which should address the following:

1. Existing services must be recognized and used. For example, information and referral services can use information services which although informal are utilized by rural citizens and can be incorporated into more formalized information and referral services. Rural citizens are well aware of the "folksy" nature of some small town newspapers, carrying news items about family and friends along with information about community activities. A number of service clubs in rural communities, ranging from 4-H clubs to Rotary and Lions' clubs for adults are important meeting places and information exchanges for farmers, ranchers, business and professional people. Using the informal sanctioning and correctional components of a community would involve the recognition of how schools ordinarily sanction youth, the use of role models in churches and community organizations which attempt to positively influence adolescents and young adults and how

families in rural areas have traditionally dealt with acting-out youth. Using a community analysis will help in this first step.

2. When entering a rural community, it is important to gain visibility and acceptance. Prejudices can quickly develop when persons are not aware of the purpose or intent of services. One way to make contact with business persons, ministers and school officials is by joining civic groups. Individual meetings with these persons is also recommended. Meeting with persons in their own homes, on the street, in the park or in front of the Post Office or bank are all ways of cultivating beginning relationships with key informants.

3. It is necessary to provide community education programs by offering to speak at civic groups, church meetings, PTA's, on the radio and with newspaper reporters. Correctional programs especially need to be brought into the open and discussed with all those concerned. No area of social services is more misunderstood and feared. What is important is to educate the community regarding how their own needs will be met by providing correctional programs at home for people, rather than in distant and alienating environments. Information and referral services can appear confusing, and the need must be carefully spelled out.

4. It is important to identify groups of interested leaders in the community to develop leadership skills through modeling, training and delegating responsibility. A volunteer or advisory group may become self-sufficient through this strategy. A group of volunteers may become indigenous workers once the service becomes

established. In information and referral, outreach workers should be hired from this group.

5. Provide recognition of successful program achievements particularly to persons living in the community. articles in the local newspaper with pictures and announcements in church bulletins are proven ways to ensure further involvement. It is especially important to disseminate accurate information regarding correctional programs in order to alleviate fear which is bound to crop up in the wake of program development in criminal justice. In information and referral services, success in other rural communities can be documented through testimony of those who have benefitted.

6. Identify the most progressive persons in town and attempt to persuade them to accept the concept of the programs emerging in the community. When persuasion is not successful, further community education is indicated.

7. Carefully study how retail businesses sell their products or services in the rural community you are wishing to address. Their strategies have been funded through careful research or through years of trial and error by community people. Try to emulate their selling strategies to develop services to the target group. As with any sort of service, it is important to ensure that information is accurate and accessible before beginning the rural outreach program. It is important to evaluate each of these strategies in each community and to modify them as needs may suggest. Redefining goals may be required over a long period of time.

Conclusion

For effective rural outreach, it is important to understand the differences and similarities among rural communities and between rural and urban settings, especially in regard to resource systems. In addition, the social and economic factors which influence everyday life in rural communities must be considered when planning for services. How technological advances have affected communities and how they can be used positively need to be addressed. Who rural clients systems are and the special dimensions of each community are further variables incorporated into an effective outreach service. Lastly, the implementation strategies used ought to fit with the particular needs and characteristics of the community. Rural outreach must be more effective if societal resources are to be distributed more justly.

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